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How to Really Get in Touch With God

Psalm 23

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Two psychiatrists were having a drink at a convention. "What was the most difficult case you ever had?" the one asked. The other replied, "A patient who lived in a fantasy world. He insisted that he had a rich uncle in South America who would soon die and leave him a fortune. Every day he waited for a letter from an attorney. I treated him with psychotherapy three times a week for eight years."

"Did you cure him?" the other psychiatrist asked.

"Yes and no," the first psychiatrist replied. "Just as I was making progress, that stupid letter arrived."

Some of the statements Jesus made about money sound like that story. We try to force his teachings into rational, scientifically verifiable thought patterns. But some of Jesus' words won't fit into those categories. At the point of financial security, for example, Jesus sounds more *radical* than *rational*. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (chapters five through seven), for example, he lists several of life's material necessities and talks about the anxiety we sometimes feel with regards these basics. Will we earn enough to attain them? Jesus concludes *that* discussion with the paradoxical statement, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:33), which we covered last week.

Now, what Jesus says in Matthew 6:33 is an interesting statement. It doesn't on its face make a lot of sense. What I mean is that it doesn't fit with the normal rules of logic, as we understand them. *In our way of thinking* you have to strive first for money so that you can purchase house and food and clothes and the other necessities of life in Vacaville, and then (when you have some leftover time), after you've relaxed, you strive for spiritual things.

So the statement Jesus gives doesn't fit real well with the normal rules of logic, but it does fit well with *the other things* Jesus says about money. If you look to the verses just before this in Matthew, you see Jesus has just finished teaching His disciples the Lord's Prayer, and among those verses we find, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Mt 6:11).Then, early in the next chapter, Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Mt 7:7). And there's some listing of the basic necessities of life that kind of proves, to me at least, that Jesus doesn't live in a fantasy world - He knows we need food and clothing and shelter.

But if I understand these passages, He seems to be saying that our financial security doesn't come by accumulating money; it comes through our daily prayer relationship with God. For Jesus, the bottom line of the family budget comes from above - but not by the procedure of adding the list of anticipated expenses. Jesus says the bottom line of our financial security comes from *God*. To get the bottom line balanced, we need to look up, and look up *first*, that is, look up before we look down at our expenses. The normal rules of logic would say this is pie-in-the-sky thinking.

So there's an implicit question in Jesus' teaching about financial security: *will I try to achieve financial security through money or through prayer?* As we answer that question, each of us

<u>tends to both believe and resist believing</u> what Jesus said is the only appropriate choice. On the one hand, we see that Jesus is right. On the other hand, we are constantly tempted to think and behave as if Jesus were wrong, at least on this issue.

The need to feel secure is basic to every personality. All of us ask, 'Am I safe?' If our emotional system doesn't hear a positive answer to this question, we experience fear and anxiety. In trying to block that painful fear and anxiety, we reach for security by using methods that everyone else uses, thinking that if everyone else does it one way, that's the safest, most secure way to go. The repeating problem is that the methods everyone else uses mostly don't work.

Whether we feel secure or insecure is greatly influenced by the feelings of hopefulness or lack of hope in our personality. Without hope, fear takes charge of our psyche. Jesus says that prayer, not money, is the secret to feeling hopeful. Much contemporary evidence says Jesus was right. Newspapers print numerous stories about people who had great wealth but lived and died in abject poverty. They had enough money, but the money didn't protect them from the demons of fear. Feelings of optimism and hopefulness about our future don't come from having sufficient money, but they do come from having the sufficiency of God, which comes primarily through prayer.

When Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the temple, his major concern was not religious rules or financial ethics. He was demonstrating that the top religious leaders had lost their spiritual focus, their way through the moral and political morass of the day. We could argue the same has happened today as we approach election day. God had been marginalized. God is marginalized today. *This* message stands a good chance of being marginalized - "He's the pastor ... he's supposed to say things like this."

But, you see, when we focus on money (getting it and keeping it) we de-couple our spiritual connection with God. It's as simple as that. It's like trying to photograph in two directions at once - you can't shoot north and south simultaneously. You see, Jesus never said money was unnecessary. *He just said it was trivial*, when compared with the central need of every human personality to feel safe, which only comes from a relationship with God.

As two little girls counted their pennies, one said, "I have five. How many do you have?" The other answered, "Ten."

"You don't! You just have five, the same as me," the first girl protested, pointing at the other girl's palm.

No, I have five here, and my dad said he would give me five more when he gets home tonight. So that makes ten."

In one sentence, that little girl's answer summarizes what Jesus said about the financial security of persons who maintain a strong prayer relationship with God. Jesus observed a poor woman giving the largest possible offering (all she had) at the temple. It's important to understand that she didn't expect to starve to death -- she didn't see herself as doing something rash. She gave generously *because she knew* there was more where that came from - God! You see? *Giving is not so much an act of generosity as an act of trust.* We don't feel financially secure because we *have*; we feel financially secure because we *trust God* to continue to providing what we need.

At this point Jesus is connecting solidly with Old Testament faith. Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"and Psalm 37: "I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." With Jesus, as with the Old Testament prophets, the bottom line question was NOT: "How much money do I have?" but rather, "Are we or are we not alone in the universe? Is there just us, or is there something

more? Are or are we not alone in this room? Is there just what we can see with our eyes and hear with our ears? Or, is there something more - something invisible, yet powerful and knowable - something that the generations before us have called God?"

If we believe what Jesus said, that God is here and that He loves us and will care for our needs like the best of good fathers, that those who relate to him in prayer and ask for His help will receive it, we can feel financially secure. Without that conviction and connection, no matter how large is your bank account, you are quite likely to feel the anxiety of financial insecurity.

Contrast with that this true story. A few years ago, a young Catholic boy had listened intently to one of Bishop Sheen's appeals on television. His family was of very modest circumstances, but they were so moved by Bishop Sheen's appeal that they rounded up all the money in the house, a total of $5.35. When someone raised the question whether they should give all of that to Bishop Sheen, the mother of the family said, "We are going to give it. It will come back to us many fold" - and they did. About a week later, the family won a hundred dollars in a drawing at the local supermarket. When the family discussed what to do with the winnings, the six-year-old promptly said, "Let's put it all back on Bishop Sheen."

Is this story a good illustration? Or is it tantamount to gambling? However we classify this little boy's idea, it doesn't fit with the normal rules of logic. That's what this sermon is about. Short of the possibility of martyrdom, I believe money is the place where the 'rubber meets the road' for the Christian. Don't dodge the issue by saying that the faith of the little boy is impractical - I'll argue that giving your life to Christ may be impractical, as the logic of the world defines things. Jesus said, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." I insist you grapple with what this means.

The Feast of Booths was one of Israel's three great annual festivals, and was celebrated by the Hebrews with great joy in the autumn, at the end of the agricultural year. The name - *booths* - comes from a verb meaning "to weave together," referring to plaited branches with which the booths were covered (Leviticus 23:34). Celebrants constructed a booth after collecting myrtle, willow, or palm twigs. They slept in and ate all their meals in these booths for seven days. This ritual reminded them of their years of living in tents while wandering in the wilderness, prior to securing their permanent homeland. But most importantly, the booths reminded them that security is not in a *house* but in *God*. When Jesus said that we find our bottom-line security by looking up, he was telling the people of Palestine something they already knew *but had forgotten*, even though they celebrated the truth *every fall* in the Feast of Booths.

Someone recently told me that "the world has gotten out of control." My response was that "the world was never *in* our control."

That's the whole point of the Feast of Booths AND Jesus' teaching about financial security AND Psalm 23. The world is not in our control; it's in God's control. So, by letting go of this illusion that we gain and maintain financial control through our own will and work, we can take the first step into true emotional peace and financial security.

You know, about 400 years ago Theresa of Avila felt called to build a convent. Since she had little money with which to do so, a practical friend warned her that she could not hope to build a convent with such a small sum. Theresa replied, "Well, that may be true. But Theresa and a small sum *and God* can build a convent!" Theresa was speaking with a wisdom that includes, but is not limited to, the normal rules of logic. She was speaking with the wisdom of the spiritual kingdom that Jesus described.

I'd like to share something really interesting with you from the Greek text. The Greek word for closet is *tameion*, meaning storehouse. Stewards or business managers went into this room to count their money. The Greek word for treasurer is *tamias*, derived from *tameion.* Now,

people who visit their safety box in the bank usually don't take a friend along. It's in just such a 'closet' that Jesus tells us to go to pray in Matthew 6:6, not in a public place where our prayer might be seen. Here, alone with our money, Jesus says we should get in touch with God. Here, in the midst of the security we tend to count on the most, we are told to seek the only fail-safe security. In your closet, with your money, with your prayers, Jesus asks you in there to 'strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these (other) things will be given to you as well.'

As last year, our stewardship program in two weeks is called "Consecration Sunday." The emphasis is on the need of the giver to give, not the need of the church to receive. The leaders of this congregation want our campaign for resources not to be budget-driven but Spirit-driven. Our goal and the goal of this sermon is to help us all to think more deeply about our priorities. Are we living in accordance with the way of the kingdom? This is a time to center ourselves anew upon the kingdom, and upon God. And this is a time to put God at the center of your lives once more. Remember, stewardship is about our faith *long before* it's about our money.

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